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### **Satisfaction with Work-Family Balance for Parents of Early Adolescents Compared to Parents of Younger Children**

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#### **Abstract**

This paper explores aspects of how parents of young teenagers experience balancing work and family demands, compared to parents of younger children. It uses data from Waves 1 and 3 of the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey and from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Time Use Survey (TUS) 1997.

It assesses whether satisfaction with work-family balance differs for parents of adolescent children compared with parents of younger children, the extent to which parents of adolescents use non-parental child care, experience difficulty in finding child care or provide personal supervision of their children after school, and whether satisfaction with work-family balance of parents with adolescents is affected by access to family-friendly work-place measures.

#### **Article Text**

Early adolescence is an important life stage transition, and the changes that occur for young people also affect how their parents can balance the demands of work and family. There is an assumption that work-family balance becomes easier as children grow, especially once they reach high school age, because they require less constant parental care. However, adolescents need an appropriate mix of independence and supervision, which may be hard for working parents to supply. Non-parental after-school care services are not widely available for children of this age, and may in any event be

too confining for them. Workplace policies may not readily accommodate the intermittent demands adolescents can place on parents. This paper explores aspects of how parents of young teenagers experience managing work and family, compared to parents of younger children.

## Background

Early adolescence is a life course stage that involves many changes. On a practical level, children move from primary school to high school. This may bring valued freedom and greater learning opportunities, but many young people find it stressful and demanding. They are making this transition at a particularly vulnerable time in their intellectual, physical and emotional development. For children of this age, family relationships become less all-consuming, and there is increased involvement with peers. Direct parental supervision declines, and young adolescents spend a growing amount of time outside the control of adults.

However, the skill and knowledge necessary for adult functioning emerges gradually and inconsistently, which means it is crucial that young teenagers have an appropriate balance of supervision and independence, so that they can develop self-reliance without being left to cope with situations they cannot handle. Providing adolescents with both appropriate support and opportunities for independence is a delicate balance, and there are practical issues which may make it even more difficult for parents. Workforce participation of mothers with older children is higher than that of mothers with younger children, which may mean that older children are less likely to have maternal supervision than younger children. At the same time, it is more difficult to find substitute care for older than for younger children. Before and after-school services are rarely available for children over 12 years of age and if they are, adolescents may be reluctant to attend because they perceive services as geared towards younger children.

This is a potential problem because after the end of the school day is a time during which young people are particularly vulnerable. Supervision after school has been found to reduce substance use, bullying, stealing and sexual activity. Many parents have concerns about after-school self-care, especially regarding their children's safety and risk-taking behaviour. Young people who are monitored are less likely to get into trouble and more likely to have better social and educational outcomes (Catterall 1998; Masten *et al* 1999; Patten 2000). Advice to parents emphasises the importance of being home after school to encourage confidences and to ensure safety. Possibly as a result, many mothers work only part-time hours and are home after school. A US study of sole mothers found some to be sufficiently concerned at the lack of substitute care that they left the workforce altogether to be available for their adolescent children. Many, however, are unable to make this choice, and there is evidence that some parents leave their children at home alone after school reluctantly under pressure of work. A US study investigating why parents let their children care for themselves rather than using other after-school arrangements found that self-care is used more often among children whose parents have an increased number of work hours.

On the other hand, the problem of after-school supervision could be overstated, and many parents may be happy to allow their adolescent children to take increasing responsibility for themselves. Although self-care is often portrayed negatively and as harmful to young people, this is not necessarily the case

and self-care may be quite adequate in meeting the needs of some children. It can depend on the attributes of the child. Not all adolescents are difficult and many justify increasing levels of independence and autonomy. A 1991 study of school children in England found that self-care grew steadily with the age of the child. While only 2.5% of five-years-olds went home to a house in which no parent was present, at age 10 the figure was 11.5%, by age 11 it was 21% and by age 12 it was over 30%. Explanations for this steady increase could include parental recognition of growing competence with age, as well as the less positive possibility that it reflects a lack of service alternatives.

To investigate whether Australian parents feel that supervision of adolescent children after school is problematic, this paper compares the workforce status of parents, the use of non-parental child care, the extent of parental dissatisfaction with service availability, and whether parents arrange their time to be with their children in the hour and a half after school, by the age of their youngest child.

Also, parents may be assisted by work-place measures. Particularly useful to parents with children in the early years of high school may be flexibility that lies in the control of the employee. In the adolescent years, parental presence may not be required constantly but the ability to be there when needed is very important. Kurz (2000) found that mothers of young teenage children particularly valued work conditions that gave them control over the management of their care responsibilities, including the ability to leave the workplace quickly if necessary, and access to a telephone to check up on children. Such measures would allow monitoring to be undertaken at a distance, and the parent to be there if an emergency arose. Inter alia, it could make adolescent self-care after school an acceptable option for working parents.

A study of children who go home to unsupervised houses in the United States found that physically removed supervision is important in assessing whether self-care has the potential to be harmful or benign in its effects on children. Steinberg also found access to a telephone to be important: if children who went home alone were routinely checked on arrival by phone, they were less likely to linger on their way home or meet with friends, and were less susceptible to peer-pressure to engage in antisocial behaviour. Whereas work-family balance for younger children may need to include substantial time off work, with older children a higher priority may be the ability to keep in touch and respond to unexpected developments and emergencies. This paper investigates whether access to family friendly workplace measures increases the satisfaction with work-family balance (SWFB) of parents of adolescent children compared to parents of younger children.

## Research focus

Little previous research has investigated how balancing work and family differs for parents of early adolescents compared to parents of younger children. As a first step in addressing this gap, the present paper asked:

1. What parental workforce transitions occur when children grow into early adolescence?
2. How does satisfaction with work-family balance (SWFB) differ for parents of early adolescent children, compared with parents of younger children?
3. Compared to parents with younger children, to what extent do parents with early adolescent children (a)

use existing childcare services? and (b) personally supervise their children after school? Is there evidence of unmet need for childcare services for adolescent children?

4. Compared to parents with younger children, to what extent do parents with early teenage children have access to family friendly workplace policies? If so, does this improve satisfaction with work-family balance? Is there evidence of unmet need for family friendly workplace policies useful to parents of adolescents?

## Method

To investigate these questions, we analysed sub-samples from two sources: the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Time Use Survey (TUS) 1997.

The Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey. HILDA is an on-going large-scale nation-wide longitudinal survey of Australian households, initiated and funded, by the Australian Government through the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). Responsibility for the design and management of the survey rests with a group comprising the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research (University of Melbourne) the Australian Council for Educational Research; and the Australian Institute of Family Studies.)

This paper uses data from Wave 1, conducted in 2001 and Wave 3, conducted in 2004. for an overview of survey methodology. The reference population comprised members of private dwellings, and a multi-stage cluster sample of households was used. Four questionnaires were administered, a household form, a household questionnaire a person questionnaire (for household members over 15 years) and a self-completion questionnaire. (See Appendix 1 for full details of survey measures).

For the present study, both cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses were used where appropriate, addressing issues of small sample size in some instances. For cross-sectional analyses, a sub-sample of Wave 1 HILDA respondents was selected according to whether the 'youngest person in the household' was aged 6-14 years. Respondents who were not part of a couple or lone family under the 'relationship in household' category were deleted. The sub-sample was then re-categorised by the age of youngest child in the household into: (a) 6-10 years (N=1221; 85.1% couple families and 14.1% lone parent families), and (b) 11-14 years (N=732; 84.7% couple families and 14.3% lone parent families). Parents between 55 and 80 years old (comprising 2.6% of this sample) were deleted, as they are less likely to be of working age. This left a final sample of 1894, with 42.6% (n=806) male. The mean age for males was 42.7 years and the mean age for females was 40.6 years. As most of the sub-sample consisted of couple families, responses from mothers and fathers were often not independent. These data were used to compare SWFB and its relationship to the availability of family friendly workplace measures, use of non-parental child care and difficulty in finding child care, in families who have a youngest child at primary school compared with those who have a youngest child at high school. All analyses were unweighted.

For the longitudinal analysis, a sub-sample of the data file for the cross-sectional analyses was selected according to whether the 'youngest person in the household' was aged between 10-11 years (comparable to Year 6 students). This was used as a proxy for parents with children in primary school, who are about to enter high school. The corresponding data from this sample at Wave 3 was merged with their Wave 1 data. By Wave 3 there was missing data on labour force status for 43

males (21.7%) and 55 females (22.2%), but the demographic profile remained similar despite this attrition. Of the 446 respondents in the sub-sample at Wave 1, 44.4% (n=198) were male. The mean age of males was 43.4 years and the mean age of females was 40.8 years. Also, 251 (84.1%) were a couple family with a child between 6-10 years, and the remaining 40 parents with a youngest between 6-10 years (15.9%) were a lone parent family. Of the 195 parents with a youngest person in the household aged 11-14 years, 182 (93.3%) were a couple family and the remaining 13 were a lone parent family. The data thus obtained were examined to describe changes in parental labour force status and to see if there was a change in SWFB in families who have made the transition from having a youngest child at primary school (at Wave 1) to having a youngest child at high school (at Wave 3).

Respondents were then re-categorised into three labour force categories: employed full-time (FT), employed part-time (PT), and not employed (which collapsed into (a) unemployed and looking for full-time work (b) unemployed and looking for part-time work (c) not in the labour force and marginally attached, and (d) not in the labour force and not marginally attached).

The Australian Bureau of Statistics Time Use Survey. The ABS TUS (1997) was a national probability sample of 4059 households. It is the most recent in a regular series of cross-sectional time-use surveys conducted by the ABS. The survey used the time-diary method. Each person aged 15 years or older resident in each sampled household was required to record all his or her activities, in five-minute intervals, over two days. The present study collected a sub-sample comprising adults of prime working age (20-54 years), in either couple or lone parent headed households (N=2712). Adults other than parents of the children were excluded. The diary showed start and finish times of each activity, and in a column asking 'Who were you with during this activity?' showed who else was present at different times of day. Using this information, we created a variable that shows when the respondent was in the company of their children. Due to coding, the age category cut-off for children was 12. We compared the proportion of parents with youngest children at pre-school (aged 3-4 years), at primary school (aged 5-10 years) and at in the first year of high school (aged 11-12) who are with their children in the first hour and a half after school, on a normal weekday.

## Results

For the present sub-sample, results were gleaned in four categories: SWFB, access to family-friendly work policies and SWFB, use of childcare services and difficulty finding childcare.

### Labour force participation

The proportion of mothers and fathers employed full-time or part-time when they have a youngest child in Year 6 (at Wave 1) and when they have a youngest child in the early high school years (at Wave 3) is shown in Figure 1. In both waves, the proportion of women and men employed full-time and part-time was relatively constant. Approximately 83% of men with late primary and early high school children were employed full-time and approximately 5.5% were employed part-time. Approximately 30% of women with late primary and early high school children were employed full-time and approximately 42%

of women were employed part-time. No significant differences were found for either men or women from Wave 1 to Wave 3. It does not appear that having their children entering high school is a trigger for a substantial change in average labour force status, for either sex.

However, for women, the overall distribution of labour force participation is composed of a number of individual movements, which are shown in Table 1. This suggests having a child make the transition to high school occasions more adjustment of female work arrangements than the average figures for the full sub-sample imply. The movements were not uniform, although (of those who gave information in both Wave 1 and Wave 3), the stronger trend was towards an increase in work hours.

Tracking each individual shows that of those women who were employed full time at Wave 1, 45% remained so at Wave 3, but 29% moved to part-time employment and 26% were no longer employed by Wave 3. Of those women who were employed part time at Wave 1, 19% remained so at Wave 3, but 45% moved to full-time employment and 36% were no longer employed at Wave 3. Of those women not employed at Wave 1, 37% remained so at Wave 3, but 35% moved to full-time employment and 27% moved to part-time employment by Wave 3. Thus it appears that women have a range of individual responses to managing market and home responsibilities with older children. In most cases, the change involves allocating more time to the work place, which supports the expectation that on average the workforce participation rate of women increases as their children got older. However, there is a smaller countervailing movement towards part time work or withdrawal from the workforce.

### **Satisfaction with work-family balance (SWFB)**

Satisfaction with work-family balance is similar for parents (working either full time or part time) who have primary school-aged and early high school-aged children. Too few people had responded to the questions on satisfaction with work-family balance (SWFB) at Wave 3 (n=77; 17.3% of the sample) to conduct longitudinal analysis. To see if clearer results emerged with larger numbers, cross-sectional analyses comparing parents of early teenage children with parents of primary school age were conducted. No significant differences were found between parents with children 6-10 years and parents with children 11-14 years on the SWFB items (see Table 2) except for two items. Working mothers with a youngest child between 6-10 years old are less likely to feel that 'work makes me a more rounded person' and 'work makes me feel competent' than working mothers with a youngest child between 11-14 years. Overall, satisfaction with work-family balance somewhat improves for parents when their children make the transition to high school, though changes are small. A possible reason for this is that parents adjust their labour force participation, in the ways described above, according to individual preference and circumstances, taking into account the needs and demands of their own particular child. It further suggests that while the needs of adolescents differ from those of younger children, some things get easier and some things get harder, so that the overall effect on SWFB is relatively neutral.

### **Access to family-friendly work policies and SWFB**

Although on average satisfaction with work-family balance did not change for parents as their

children moved from primary to high school, we were interested to tease out factors that may contribute to this finding for particular subsets of parents. One factor that may enhance their perceptions of satisfaction is access to family-friendly work-place measures (outlined above). The proportion of men and women who responded 'Yes' or 'No' to being able to use various family-friendly work policies in their current job is shown in Table 3. For approximately 35% of the sample, access to paid and unpaid maternity leave was coded as 'not applicable' (n=649 and n=663, respectively).

The proportion of fathers (approximately 57%) who reported access to unpaid maternity leave and permanent part time work in their current job (regardless of the age of their youngest child) was substantially less than the proportion of mothers who reported access to these two family-friendly work policies (approximately 79%). This is consistent with a selection effect, but could also indicate that mothers are more aware of the policies, or that fathers respond as not having access to paid maternity because they are men. Of all the family-friendly workplace measures, access to home-based work was the least often available for both women and men. The other family friendly measures were generally equally available to men and to women. There was no evidence of a selection effect by age of youngest child. The question here is how the presence of family friendly measures relates to satisfaction with work-family balance by the age of the youngest child. In other words, are some measures more useful to parents with younger children than to parents of older children?

To investigate this, the relationship between access to family-friendly work policies and SWFB was examined for mothers and fathers by the age of their youngest child. The sample size of mothers and fathers who were able to use the various family-friendly work policies were small in the longitudinal data set (12<N<88), so cross-sectional analyses on the Wave 1 data set were conducted. Mothers and fathers who had access to each of the policies were selected, and then were compared on their SWFB scores by age of their youngest child. The significant results are reported in Table 4. The results of a MANOVA provided some support for the idea that access to family-friendly work policies is associated with higher satisfaction with work-family balance for parents of older children, but only for mothers with access to flexible start and finish times, and only on three of the 13 SWFB items.

Mothers of 11-14 year olds with access to flexible start and finish times reported significantly lower scores on 'work makes me a more rounded person' and higher scores on 'work makes me feel competent' and 'my work has a positive effect on my children', than mothers of 6-10 year olds with access to this family friendly work policy. That is, mothers of high school children who have access to flexible start and finish times overall report slightly higher SWFB than mothers of primary school children with access to this family friendly work policy. This implies that mothers of high school children would benefit from having access to flexible start and finish times. The literature suggests a family friendly measure that may be particularly useful to parents of young teens is flexibility within the workers' control, which would allow them to respond to emergencies and to be there when needed. Our results imply that more worker-controlled flexibility would be valued by mothers of young teens, though only marginally more than by mothers of primary school children.

### **Use of childcare services**

Table 5 shows the number of parents using different types of childcare services by the age of their youngest child. When a youngest child is at high school only two were used in sufficient numbers to

examine – (a) me or my partner and (b) child looks after self. There are many more children aged 11-14 years looking after themselves than younger children. Nearly 40% of children in this age group look after themselves after school.

### **Difficulty finding childcare**

An important question is whether the high number of early teenage children who are not supervised after school is an unproblematic reflection of their growing independence and capability, or an unwelcome result of a service gap. To investigate this, we compared parents' reported difficulty finding child care by the age of their children at Wave 1. Overall, scores on all items assessing difficulty finding child care were low, ranging from 0.76 to 4.39 on a possible scale of 0 to 10. Specifically, parents of 11-14 year olds reported less difficulty finding care for a sick child, with the cost of child care, and with juggling multiple childcare arrangements than parents of 6-10 year olds.

However, whether parental supervision is available after school is closely related to mother's employment status. When children are young, decision-making about providing care and being in paid work is intertwined. As they grow, other factors such as age and skill level will also have an effect on maternal labour force participation. Our question is the extent to which childcare responsibilities continue to play a part. The results in Table 7 show that 70% of mothers with 6-10 year old children and 50% of mothers with 11-14 year old children work part-time rather than full-time because they are caring for their children. So although fewer mothers of older children feel childcare responsibilities are a reason to limit their work hours than mothers of younger children, a large proportion continues to feel this way.

To further explore whether some mothers of older children who remain out of the labour force or work only part-time do so because they prefer not to leave their adolescents unsupervised after school hours, we conducted a time use analysis. Time use measures can indicate how having children from one school stage move to the next affects the likelihood that they spend time alone and unsupervised after school, in association with female workforce participation. With a youngest child at primary school, mothers who work part time are as likely to be with their children after school as mothers who do not work (see Figure 2). This suggests they are arranging their work around their children's school hours.

With a youngest child at high school, both part-time and full-time employed women are substantially less likely to be with their children than their counterparts who have younger children. However, mothers who work part-time are on average much more likely to be with their children than mothers who work full-time, which suggests that many are arranging their work hours around their children (albeit to a lesser extent than mothers of younger children). Further, mothers who are not in the labour force are only marginally less likely to be with their older children than their younger children. So mothers who are not in the labour force are with their older children after school almost to the same extent as homemaker mothers of younger children. This suggests a selection effect, although it is not possible to categorically determine whether these mothers are with their children at this time of day because they are out of the workforce for other reasons, or that they remain homemakers because they do not wish to leave their adolescent children unsupervised.

## Conclusion

Early adolescence is a period of change and development for children. Having their children make the transition into the early teen years also impacts upon what parents need to do to successfully manage the demands of work and family. This paper explored aspects of how parents of young teenagers manage balancing work and family, compared to parents of younger children. In the main having children move into adolescence was not associated with significant decreases in reported difficulty for parents juggling work and home, contrary to popular expectations that difficulties with work-family balance ease for parents as children get older. Parents of early teenage children expressed slightly more satisfaction with their work than parents of younger children, in particular, the extent to which they felt 'work makes me a more rounded person' and 'work makes me feel competent'. The needs of adolescent children differ from those of younger children, but our findings suggest the demands upon parents balancing work and family re-calibrate rather than reduce or increase overall. Some things may get easier, but other challenges emerge.

We investigated whether a lack of formal childcare provision (which generally ceases when children leave primary school) created work-family balance problems for parents of young teens. Many more children of early high school age look after themselves after school than do younger children, but unmet need for after-school care for children in the early years of high school did not emerge as a major expressed concern. This suggests that rather than being the result of a problematic service gap, the move from proximal to distal support as reflected in after-school self-care is seen by most parents as developmentally appropriate.

There will, however, be individual exceptions to this, and our findings indicate that a substantial proportion of mothers remain out of the labour force or work part time when their children are older, because they feel unable to leave their adolescents unsupervised outside of school hours. Decisions about how much time to allocate to paid employment and how much time to allocate to children are not easily disentangled, but our results are consistent with the interpretation that in the absence of formal care provision for adolescents, many mothers continue to provide care themselves. Fifty percent of mothers with high school aged youngest children reported that they worked part-time rather than full-time because of childcare responsibilities. Our time use analysis showed that mothers who are not in the labour force are with their older children after school almost to the same extent as homemaker mothers of younger children, and that mothers who work part time are much more likely to be with their adolescent children after school than mothers who work full time. This suggests that some mothers of adolescents organise their work hours around their children's school hours, as do (many more) mothers of younger children. Finally, that a number of women changed their labour force status at the time their children reached adolescence also suggests a mixture of individual responses to managing market and home responsibilities with older children. While the stronger trend was towards increasing work hours, a substantial minority reduced their hours. The results indicate that many women's work opportunities continue to be affected by family responsibilities, even with older children.

We found some indication that the presence of family-friendly policies, in particular access to flexible start and finish times, improves satisfaction with work-family balance for mothers of adolescent children. Further, on a separate measure we found that satisfaction with the flexibility to balance work and non-work commitments slightly increased for mothers as their children moved from primary school to high school. These results fit with research suggesting that parent's SWFB becomes slightly easier as

their children mature but that adolescents' need for supervision and parental care are relatively unpredictable due to the inconsistent emergence of autonomy and independence. The difficulty this causes parents who have to respond to unexpected or intermittent care requirements could be ameliorated by the introduction of work-place practices that allow more worker-controlled flexibility. Possible measures range from minor freedoms, such as allowing parents to use the telephone to check on children at home, or to leave work in an emergency, to instituting arrangements whereby parents change their daily hours, move in and out of part-time work, or take leave or reduce their hours during school holidays.

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